It Takes Time to Unlearn Hate by bencanwrite

Category: Stranger Things (TV 2016)
Genre: Bullying, Coming Out, Gay Will Byers, Gen, Good Parent Joyce Byers, Implied/Referenced Child Abuse, Implied/Referenced Domestic Violence, Internalized Homophobia, Period-Typical Homophobia, Season/Series 03 Spoilers, We Do NOT Stan Lonnie Byers in this House, We Stan Joyce Byers
Language: English
Characters: Eleven | Jane Hopper, Jonathan Byers, Joyce Byers, Lonnie Byers, Will Byers
Relationships: Joyce Byers & Will Byers, Will Byers & Eleven | Jane Hopper
Status: Completed
Published: 2019-07-20
Updated: 2021-05-21
Packaged: 2022-03-31 22:13:45
Rating: Teen And Up Audiences
Warnings: No Archive Warnings Apply
Chapters: 4
Words: 4,237
Publisher: archiveofourown.org
Summary:

The Byers move out of Hawkins, and El asks questions.
Will needs a supportive family, and he has one, even if he doesn't quite know it yet.

1. Chapter 1

Author's Note:

> TW: Homophobic Slurs, Domestic abuse (Lonnie Byers), Bullying, Internalized Homophobia.

The Byers had officially moved out of Hawkins, Indiana.

And it royally sucked.

Actually, most of it was alright. The area was a bit more populated and didn't have a history with genetic experimentation as far as they knew, so even though it was a louder place, it was certainly more chilled out. And the house they moved into was a bit bigger than the old house, which meant more variation and less connections to the events that occurred in the small town in Indiana.

The school is what sucked. Finally starting high school was way worse than Will and El thought it would be. While *zombie boy* wasn't part of the new school's vocabulary, almost every other insult that Will was accustomed to were. Every slur, every pinch at his clothes or jab at the way he carried himself. And El..

El didn't have formal education until she was adopted by Hopper, and no offense to him, but morse code probably should have been lower on the list than *maths*. And while she was getting so much better at conversing and understanding more and more words, she was still behind. And the kids at their new school were quick to notice that.

So on their first day of school, the two would tell their mom that "yes, we met new people," and it technically wasn't a lie. Not the whole truth, but definitely not a lie. The whole truth was more along the lines of "yes, we met new people, and they spotted me and threw a slew of slurs my way, including fag and queer which were some old favourites of mine, and El was harassed and told that even though her mouth wouldn't produce intelligent sentences, this new person was *certain* that she'd have a grand old time sucking him off."

They stuck to the half truth.

And they stuck together. During the school day when they were apart, they'd endure what was thrown at them. And when the school day was finished, they'd meet up and just talk. They'd talk about what happened, what homework was assigned, what did Person A mean when they whispered Insult X to Person B, and on a scale of one to ten, how shit was the cafeteria food that day.

Will didn't like explaining insults to Eleven, especially when one day after school, she mentioned overhearing someone and asked what they meant when they called Will a fairy.

"I don't understand… fairies are in stories. They're not real." She cocked her head a little bit, and whispered quietly as if it were a secret, even though the two were alone in the (enormous) house.

"Well," he rubbed at the back of his neck. "Yeah, but when they say it, they don't mean fairy stories."

"I don't understand." Her eyebrows were scrunched in concentration, as if what Will was saying was the most important thing in the world in that moment.

"It- it's more of a nickname for something else. Something bad. A nickname isn't really the right word to use, but I suppose it's the closest thing."

"Something bad? Like the Upside Down?"

"N-no, no, no… it's a human bad thing…?"

"Like the bad men?"

"Not them either, it's…" This wasn't working the way he wanted it to, and Will knew that.

"It's another word that describes…" he couldn't say the word that first arrived in his mind, it was too… vile for him to teach her. "It's another word for queer."

“Queer?” When El said it, it was said with such genuine curiosity that Will’s heart rate quickened. She was so sheltered in the *bad place* that she just.. Didn't understand.

“A… a boy who likes boys.”

Her concentrated scowl deepened: “But the boy who said that about you said it to a friend. Does he not like his friend?”

Will shook his head and looked away. “No, I mean a boy who *likes* boys. Like *like* likes boys.”

“I don’t understand.”

“The way Dustin likes Suzie, or Lucas likes Max… Like how Mike likes *you*.” Will continued to stare at the ground and opted to pick at a stray bit instead of saying anything else.

“What does that have to do with fairies?”

“I… I don't really know. It's just a word that has another meaning, I guess.”

“Are you, then? Are you a fairy?”

Will jerked his head back up and looked at El. She didn’t have an ounce of malice in her question, and it reflected in her face. She didn't know what she was saying. Not really.

“What? No, I’m… I’m not like that. That would be bad.”

“Why?”

“Because it is.”

“*Why* though?”

“Because it’s dirty, and unnatural, and unlawful to be that way.” Will closed his eyes.

Eleven said nothing more for a few moments. Those moments were filled with tension, and Will hated every word that spilled out of his

mouth. But it was true, wasn't it? According to his father, according to Troy. And then-

"Why?"

Will looked around the room, as if the walls would suddenly have the answer he needed. As if the floral wallpaper held all the right words he was supposed to say to this strange girl who was now his sister and didn't understand the way that things worked.

"I don't know," he answered honestly. The last words he said to El were "I'm tired" and he went up to his room, where Eleven could hear the door locking and Will's quiet sobs echoed in the near vacant house.

The two didn't bring it up again.

Over the course of that week and the following, El heard many people, though mostly one boy who she found out was named Jack, call Will many more things that weren't fairy. She supposed they must all have meant the same thing, though, as queer was often thrown in with them. She heard poofter, fruity, sissy, frilly, gay, fairy, AIDS, nellie boy, and fag all just tossed at Will, who never batted an eye.

2. Chapter 2

Notes for the Chapter:

TW: Homophobic Slurs

Lonnie Byers is abusive so please be aware of that.

The Byers were sitting having Chinese takeout in what was going to be their new dining room, but lacked the table and chairs to properly call it that yet. They were sitting on the hardwood, surrounded by paper boxes and napkins, when El looked up from her food.

“Joyce?”

“Yes, El?”

“Why is it bad to be queer?”

Will choked on the noodles he was eating and stood, saying he had to use the bathroom. He ran out of the dining room, and the bathroom door slammed. Jonathan looked at
Joyce.

“I- it's… It's kind of hard to explain why people think it is, but I can tell you that it isn't.” She set her chopsticks down. “Who told you it was?”

“Will did.”

Joyce’s eyes widened. Her Will? There was no way. Her head whipped to Jonathan, as if to ask if he knew. Jonathan shook his head.

“He said that to you?”

She nodded. “He said it was dirty, unnatural, and unlawful to be that way.”

Joyce sighed in disbelief. She couldn’t believe what she was hearing. She set the box of rice on the floor, wiped her hands off with a

napkin, and walked in front of El. She sat down and put both hands on El's shoulders.

"Look. I don't know much, and I know that I was raised to understand all that to be true, but as I go through life, I've found some things to be untrue. It's hard to unlearn something, but that's what's necessary sometimes. So.. no matter what anyone says, it's not dirty, it's not unnatural, and it's not unlawful. You love who you love, and no one can take that away from you."
Eleven's eyebrows scrunched again. "But I'm not queer," she said.

"Maybe not, but if someone tells you they are, you have to remember that. Okay? Be there for them. Be a friend, not another enemy."

"Okay."

Joyce Byers was a good person. She didn't always think so, but that's what she did her damn best to be. So when she witnessed her husband shouting at their ten year old son as he walked in the door from his "birthday hunting trip," crying over the dead rabbit that Lonnie was practically waving in Jonathan's face as he called him a 'sissy' over and over again, she stepped in and defended her boy. She yelled at her husband for calling their son those things, she yelled at him for the rabbit, and she yelled at him for yelling at their son.

Joyce sent Jonathan to his room and turned to her husband.

"How could you do that, Lonnie, you know he's a sensitive kid! You know he'd rather listen to music than go hunting!"

"I was trying to turn him into a man, Joyce! He spends way too much time with those damn comics, and he's gonna be a sissy for the rest of his life if we don't do something!"

"He likes those damn comic books and he's going to read them if he wants to! I don't care if he grows up to be a sissy his whole life, if he's happy, I don't care!"

She lies to Jonathan about the red mark on her cheek.

Three years later and Joyce Byers comes home from work to find Lonnie passed out on the couch, empty beer bottle in hand, and her newly nine year old son, Will, hiding in the corner, tucked between the wall and the china cabinet. He was shaking, but not crying.

“Will? Will what’s wrong, baby?” she ran over to him and helped him up, giving him a hug, and then left her hands on his shoulders.

“Dad got mad again.”

“What? What happened?”

“I was colouring, and dad wanted me to watch football with him. I said I didn’t want to, and he took the crayon from me, snapped it, and threw all of my drawings on the floor.” As the recollection progressed, Will got closer and closer to tears. “He ripped some up and called me something, but I don't know what it means. He started swinging the beer bottle around, so I hid.”
He wasn't crying yet, but his eyes were watering quickly.

“What did he call you?”

“He said something like, ‘I won't have my son spend his time like this, he won’t grow up to be a… fag? Yeah, that’s what he said.” He sniffed and wiped his eyes, trying to prevent the tears from spilling.

Joyce lunged forward and brought her son into a tight hug, running one hand up and down his back, the other secure on his head.

“Oh baby, I’m so sorry.”

“But what does it mean, mom?” She released him from her grip.

“It's a terrible word that means a boy who likes boys. It's another word for queer.”

“But dad goes hunting with his friends, and they're all boys. Does he not like them?”

“No, I mean like likes boys.”

Will looked at her, confused.

“A boy who likes boys the way that most boys like girls. The way your dad....” she shook her head. “The way Mike’s dad likes Mike’s mom.” She knew the Wheelers well, her son had been friends with their son for four years now, and knew Will would understand what she meant.

“Oh.”

“Are you okay, Will?”

“Is it really that bad?”

“To be queer? I don't… I… No, no, your dad was just a bit drunk, he didn’t know what he was saying.” She smiled nervously and rubbed his shoulder soothingly. “Why don't you go get in the car and we’ll get you some new crayons, yeah?”

After all these years, she never thought she’d be climbing stairs to her son’s room where she was going to have this conversation. He was such a sweet kid, there was no way he said all that stuff. She knew she wasn’t perfect, and sometimes it was hard for her to accept things like queer people, but ever since Lonnie, she tried so hard to make sure her kids felt safe. And if that meant disregarding things she’s known to be true her whole life, so be it.

“Will?” She knocked on his door. “Will, can I talk to you?” She slowly turned the doorknob, pleased to find it unlocked. “I'm coming in, honey.”

Joyce opened the door to see her son under the blanket on his makeshift bed, and turned to face the wall.

“Honey?” she walked over and sat down next to him, but he didn't turn to face her. “Did… Did you tell Eleven that it was dirty to be queer?”

He nodded.

“Why did you say that?”

He shrugged.

“Honey, I need you to talk to me about this. It's important to me.”

“I said that because it’s true, right? I mean, that’s what dad said. Dad said it was filthy. And everyone at school said it. Well, says it, I suppose. I heard this one lady outside the church say that ‘fags go to hell.’ Might as well tell Eleven the truth.”

“No, no no no, it’s not.”

“Yes, mom. It is.” He still wouldn’t look at her.

“Why does this matter so much to you? Why do you believe them?”

“Well because they're right mom!” He turned and looked her in the eyes, his own starting to water. “They’re right about me. I am a fag. I'm a queer, and a fairy, and a sissy, and a frilly nellie boy. And I tried. I tried so hard to not be. I danced with that girl at the snowball, I went on a date with a girl, I let her kiss me. I tried, mom. And I still look at them. At the boy in my science class with the curly blond hair, at the boy in my English class with the big brown eyes. And I think about them. I don't think about girls, I don't care if ‘Sarah from History’ has been doodling my name in her planner surrounded by hearts. I care about the boy from my maths class, who has a bright smile, and big, round eyes, and freckles that litter his face like stars. I don't think about kissing ‘Jane in PE,’ who checks me out every time I run across the field, I think of kissing Andrew from Art class, who always has charcoal on his face, and whose every outfit has some form of paint splatters on it. That’s why it matters to me, mom. That’s how I know they’re right: every glance I steal, my stomach flips and I feel so guilty, like I’ve done something wrong. And it’s because I have.” Tears were streaming down his face, and Joyce pulled her son into a tight hug.

“Oh, Will. Honey, I’m so sorry. You’ve done nothing wrong. You aren’t wrong. You’re you, and that’s what’s important.” Joyce was crying too. “I’m so sorry that you’ve been wrestling with this this whole time, you should never have had to keep it in.”

Joyce Byers held her son close and knew this was not the end of this journey. She knew it would take a long time for him to unlearn all of this hatred that was buried inside of Will.

But she'd be damned if she wasn't with him every step of the way.

3. Chapter 3

Notes for the Chapter:

TW: Homophobic Slurs

It got easier, Joyce supposed.

She noticed that Will seemed… lighter, if only a little bit. ‘How was school?’s were now met with more truthful answers, he opened up a little more about what was said at school, but only if Joyce promised that she wouldn’t approach their principle about it.

“It only makes it worse,” he said.

One day, after a particularly late shift at work, she comes home to find Will sitting on their sofa. He had his knees pulled up to his chest, and he was staring at the mantel, where Joyce had just begun to hang pictures.

“Hey, baby, what’s up? It’s nearly 12, you should probably be in bed.”

“Couldn’t sleep.”

“Nightmares?”

“Yeah, but not… the usual ones.”

Joyce set her bag down and walked over to him. She sat down on the couch and gently started rubbing his back. He still didn’t look at her.

“Do you want to talk about them?”

“Yes. But I don’t know how.”

Joyce creased her eyebrows. She wasn’t sure how to continue. She glanced over to the mantel where Will was still staring. There were photos of Jonathan, Will, herself, and even El had a photo or two up. There was one group photo of all the kids back in Hawkins.

“Was it about your friends?”

Will shrugged.

“About school?”

Will said nothing. He turned to look at her. He opened his mouth as if he was going to say something, but he closed it quickly.

“It’s okay,” Joyce said. “You don’t have to. I’m always here for you, so if you want to head back to bed, that’s okay.” She stood to walk to her room, when Will grabbed her sleeve.

“Wait- don't.. I just..”

She sat back down.

“Okay.” she pulled her feet onto the couch and was now sitting cross legged and facing Will.

“I want to talk to you about it; I swear I do. It’s just.. So difficult.” He emphasized difficult, and rested his chin on his knees. His hands fidgeted with his pyjama pant legs, and he peered at Joyce out of the corner of his eye.

She nodded her head with a look of focus in her eye, making sure that he felt heard.

“I still feel… that all this,” he gestured to himself. “Is wrong. That I’m… wrong.” He turned to face his mom, but he didn’t look her in the eye.

Joyce made a guess. “Are your nightmares about.. About you?” She waited for him to respond, so when he nodded, she elaborated. “About you.. Being queer?”

Will closed his eyes. He nodded. “I don’t know why it's so easy for people to recognize that, but everywhere I go… It’s like I have a sign over my head that lets everyone know: ‘hey everyone! Will Byers is a huge fag!” He let his legs unfurl and dangle over the couch, and threw his hands in the air. Joyce put her arm on his, and massaged with her thumb.

“Will. I’m so sorry.”

“Not your fault.” He looked down at his hands in his lap. “I just can’t shake the feeling that everything that happened in Hawkins was some.. Higher power or something saying that I really am an abomination. That I’m a freak and that every scary thing that happened… I deserved.”

“Oh, Will, baby, I’m so sorry. You didn’t deserve any of it, I swear, okay?”

Will shrugged. “Yeah, I guess. Thanks.” Will stood up. “I’m gonna try and get some sleep. See you in the morning.”

“O-okay honey. Sweet dreams. Come get me if you-”

“If I need anything. Yeah, mom. I know.” He turned and walked up the stairs, and Joyce began to cry on the couch.

Notes for the Chapter:

> Sorry, it's a little short! I'm in a bit of a rut at the moment, but I'm working hard to keep this going! :)

4. Chapter 4

Summary for the Chapter:

> i really didnt think i was coming back to this one lads and yet i saw it on my way to upload a very quick jatp oneshot and i just,,,, it Called me,,,, so Here We Go Boys (girls, and non-binary* individuals :D)

The next morning, Jonathan Byers walked downstairs to find his mom curled up on the couch. It was Saturday, and she didn't have work, so he figured he'd let her sleep. He fetched a blanket for her, and started making breakfast. Soon, the smell of pancakes was drifting through their house, and the other two children made their way down. No one said anything, until the silence became too much to bear.

"How did everyone sleep?" Jonathan asked, attempting to start a conversation.

"Fine," Will said, looking down at his food.

"I slept fine. I had a nightmare about the Upside Down, again, though." El looked up. She shrugged.

"Do- do you want to talk about it?" Jonathan offered. He wasn't great at being empathetic most of the time, but he figured he'd do his best. El shook her head.

"I know it isn't real; it can't hurt me."

Will was quiet. He didn't tell Jonathan that he really didn't sleep at all last night, as the Upside Down had come back to haunt him as well. And instead of his friends helping him, this time they let the Demogorgon get him. They also shouted some familiar words at him, but hey, what was new? His dreams nowadays often include his friends calling him things.

"Will?" Jonathan tapped Will's hand.

Will shook his head and left his trance. “Yeah?”

“You sure you’re okay? You’ve been kinda spacey.”

“Uhm… yes. Everything’s great.”

Over the course of the next few weeks, El had finally started making some friends. Janice was a girl in some of her classes, and El was getting on well with her. So well, in fact, that El was now spending the night at her house. Which, with Joyce’s late hours, left the Byers boys home alone. Jonathan had noticed that Will hadn’t been… well, happy. Not for a long time. He had moments where he smiled, but Jonathan knew his brother well enough that he knew they weren’t really genuine.

At present, Will was sketching on the couch, his legs pulled up, and a blanket draped over him. Jonathan sat down.

“Hey, Will,” he said.

Will looked up. “Hi.”

“Can I ask you a question?”

Panic flashed through Will’s eyes.

“It’s nothing bad, I don’t think. Just a question. You don’t have to answer if you really don’t want to.”

“Ye-yeah. Go ahead.”

“Are you… like… how are you…”

“Jonathan? Are you… okay?”

Jonathan looked up from where he was fidgeting with his hands. “Me? Yes, I’m… Yes, I'm fine. Are you?”

“Am I.. okay?”

“Yeah.”

“Yeah. Fine.”

“Will, I don’t mean to pry. You know that. It’s just… You haven’t been… yourself?”

“And how would you know?” Will snapped.

Jonathan blinked in surprise. Will backtracked.

“That’s not- I didn’t- I’m-“

“Hey,” Jonathan leaned forward and placed a hand on Will’s knee. “Finish your thought. Why wouldn’t I know?”

“I just meant… like… You don’t know me. Not… not really.”

“Can I argue?” Jonathan raised his eyebrow and adjusted his posture.

“I mean… I guess.”

“I know my brother. He’s a strong kid, even if he’s a little nervous and shy. He’s an artist, and can capture some really cool shit on a page,” he and Will chuckled at Jonathan’s language. “He’s seen some messed up stuff, but he’s still so kind and understanding. He’s a little lonely, but loves his friends with all his heart. See? I know you pretty well.”

Will’s small smile faltered. “Yeah. I suppose.”

“Is there anything else?”

Will sighed and closed his sketchbook. He sat up straighter and took a deep breath. “I’m gonna tell you something. Okay?”

“Yeah, of course.”

“I’m… I’m, uh.”

“S’okay. Take your time.”

“I’m a... queer.”

Neither of them said anything, and the silence was painful. Will was

getting more and more anxious by the minute, and Jonathan wasn't helping.

"I… okay."

"Okay? That's it? What do you mean, 'okay'?"

"I mean, it's… okay. I can't say I was expecting it, but I'm still, uh, here for you, you know?"

"I don't. I mean, I, I guess I didn't? Like, logically I've started understanding that mom's okay with it, and you probably would be, but… God, there's nothing that can actually make me believe it."

Jonathan nodded. "I mean, it makes sense. You've seen some shit, kid. And not just the supernatural kind."

They sat in silence for a little longer before Jonathan spoke up again. "Can I, uh, ask you a question?"

Will froze, eyes widening. "I, um… I guess?"

"It's nothing bad, I promise, I just… Do your friends know? Mike, Dustin, Lucas? Max?"

"…"

"You don't have to answer, I was just-"

"I think Mike knows."

"You think?" Jonathan moved closer to Will on the couch, visually telling him he had his brother's full attention.

"He said something to me. Before we left. I dunno, we've been in a sorta weird spot, but everything feels as close to normal as it's ever gonna get."

"Do you, uh, wanna talk about it?"

"Not really. Thanks though. You're a good brother."

Jonathan laughed and pulled Will in for a side hug. "I try my best."

He paused for a little longer. “You said mom knows?”

“Mhm. I told her a little while ago. Not because I didn't wanna tell you first, it's just that- I”

“It's okay-”

“I don't think I could have handled it if you weren’t cool with it, and mom kinda pressed it out of me- not in a bad way! She was really understanding about it, but it's not like I planned on telling her when I did.”

“And El?”

“I haven’t told her, but she’s a smart kid; she’s probably picked up on some context clues.”

He hummed, and then he stood up.

“Cmon, let's get you some ice cream. We can listen to Bowie or something, how’s that?”

“Sounds great,” Will said with a soft smile. He was grateful for his mom and his brother. He was grateful for El, Max, Lucas, and Dustin. He was even grateful for Mike, and decided he was going to draw him something to send him later. He knew he had a ways to go, and there were still days when he felt irredeemable and dirty, but his family was there for him, and for that, he was glad.

Author's Note:

> *Whaaaaat? me? updating this?? what is this timeline???*
> *idk, but enjoy your food you sad queers /j*